Clips

Pers. Sonsteby, Gunnar

ESPIONAGE AS PROFESSION

Following is a translation of an article by Ted Cordova-Claure entitled, "Espionage As Profession," in the Spanish-language magazine Momento (Moment), Caracas, No. 513, 15 May 1966, pp. 20 - 23.

The year 1944 was dying in the midst of a winter whose hardness had been exceeded by the events. The balance of power in Europe was definitely inclining in favor of the Allies as Hitler's Wehrmacht was beginning to cede terrain en all fronts. In the invisible fight of espionage, the Germans also had passed over to the defensive.

A German official arrived at the dockyard building of Bergen on the Norwegian coast of the North Sea. The German military automobile Wanderer stopped in front of the gate, always well guarded. Within, hundreds of Norwegian workers were doing forced labor for the Germans in repairing torpedo-boats and submarines for the Nazi fleet. But all knew that Norway was living the last days of the long night of Nazi occupation.

The official entered the building at the moment when the telephone of the guard sounded. The worker answered the call and translated for the soldier. A voice cried out:

"It is Gunnar Sonsteby calling ... Leave this building immediately ..... Leave immediately what will blow up in a thousand pieces within two minutes."

The German guard fled. Other guards did the same. The worker sounded the alarm and also fled. Presently dozens of workers left running, squeezing themselves through the gate. The official who arrived in the Wanderer was practically trampled under foot. He cried out and wanted to know what was going on. The only answer was "Sonsteby, Sonsteby."

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The official did not understand. He was not well informed by the German intelligence service -- until about 120 seconds later when his body flew through the air among the splinters of the dock yard.

Sonsteby, the famous number 24, the invisible saboteur of Norway, the man the Gestapo never could catch was a courteous secret agent, always calling by telephone at the last moment to save human lives. Generally, the mentioning of his name was enough to save the lives of innocent people as well as that of German soldiers. "Sonsteby speaking" meant an immediate explosion, the destruction of barracks, of a munitions depot or of a destroyer anchored on the Norwegian coasts.

The activities of this saboteur of the Second World War took place under the strictest secret. Only now, more than twenty years after, the autobiography of Sonsteby, "Report of Agent Number 24," has been published in its entirety.

British literary critics have rated Sonsteby as the Norwegian version of James Bond, only that in this case everything related is the truth.

In these James-Bondian times, when the image of the secret agent has been deformed by sadistic play-boyish tendencies of the common man -- a collective debility exploited by the author Ian Fleming and the producers of film series -- the examples of these espionage heroes, especially during the Second World War, seem to be forgotten. Three books recently published in three different countries and political systems are restoring the records of the real heroes of espionage.

Besides the mentioned "Report of Agent No. 24," originally published in Norway at the beginning of the year, the Soviet Union published the recollections of Rudolf Abel, the ace of Soviet espionage during the Cold War. A third book is "The Case of Richard Sorge," edited by Harper and Row in London and New York. Sorge, the master key of the Russian espionage system in the Orient, is the hero of the Soviet Union, has been commemorated on a postage stamp, and an oil tanker of the Russian navy is plying the seas bearing his name. But Sorge, of the three spies mentioned in these three books, is the only one who did not survive to be recompensed: he was hanged by the Japanese in Sugamo prison in Tokyo at the end of 1944, precisely at the time when Sonsteby acted in Norway and when Abel was already organizing the espionage activities of the USSR in the United States. At the same time acted in Europe, with a base in Switzerland, another famous

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agent: Allen Dulles, who later was the first head of the Central Intelligence Agency.

These spies of real life were individuals of a character much different from those presented to us by James Bond, although the risks and also the extraneous technical resources did not differ much from fiction. Besides, while the description of their personalities holds nothing exciting -- Sorge as well as Sonsteby were cold, placid men -- their adventures were really impassioned.

The Russian Abel, a real braggert, always acted with great agility under the noses of the Federal Bureau of Investigation until the day when the North American agents were able to capture him with his hands in the dough in a New York hotel. Abel related that even at the moment of his capture the FBI agents seemed ingenuous and inefficient. A small device with the secret espionage keys was the only thing I had in my possession when six agents of the FBI entered my hotel, relates Abel. However, before taking me out as a prisoner, they permitted me to enter the bathroom, a circumstance of which I made use by throwing the device into the water closet and flushing the water. Abel added that the FBI agents were really imprudent and should not have left him out of their eyes for a single moment.

Abel was sentenced to life imprisonment in the United States, but later the USSR retrieved him in exchange for the spy-pilot Gary Powers, whose plane was downed in the famous incident of 1960. The U-2 was shot down over Soviet territory and Powers sentenced to imprisonment in Russia. Abel gives to understand that he was not sentenced to death in the United States because of the possibility that he might some day want to buy his liberty for the secrets he undoubtedly knew. And then, giving his memoirs a political tone, he stated that he had never lost confidence that he would never be abandoned by the Moscow Government, and that his faith in the Communist system was compensated when the Russians paid his exchange with Powers.

The most famous of all spies in any case was Richard Sorge, concerning whom at least half a dozen books have been written. However, the last work by the writers employed by Oxford University, F. W. Deakin and G. R. Storry, is the most complete.

Sorge was an experienced spy of the Soviet Service in 1933, acting as a German journalist. In fact, everyone believed

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that Sorge was German and as such he was prominent as a correspondent of the newspaper Frankfurter Zeitung in Tokyo. Sorge, on the other hand, was a spy who received no orders from any head of the secret service and who acted with absolute initiative. His best contact with Moscow was at the Kremlin, and it was a rude Bolshevik with thick mustaches, called Joseph Stalin, with whom Sorge was connected directly from any point and at whatever cost each time he requested it.

Undoubtedly, in times of war, spies have a much greater immediate practical value than in more peaceful times. Sorge arrived in Japan as a German correspondent and immediately transformed himself into a favorite of Hitler's embassy in Tokyo. His contacts became vitally important when the Germany-Japan-Italy axis was established.

It is asserted that Sorge advised Stalin of the Japanese preparations to attack Pearl Harbor and warned of the German invasion of Russia more than a month in advance. This last aspect has originated a controversy among the authors investigating Sorge's life. Some state that Stalin did not give credit to Sorge's reports and others that the spy, in fact, did not transmit the intelligence in spite of his knowledge.

Sorge fell in love with a Jpanese girl. He was arrested by the Japanese secret police a few days before a Russian submarine was to pick him up at the Japanese coast. He was subjected to a trial and dreadful tortures. They finally lost patience and hanged him. Biographers state that the immutable Stalin greatly lamented the loss of his ace spy in the Orient.

Sorge was the real intelligence agent type, quiet men, with contacts in the upper political world, with a strict mission of intelligence. The Norwegian Sonsteby, on the other hand, was a man of action, the saboteur who, besides spying on the enemy, had the mission to destroy him. His life was eternal clandestineness and his skill to place explosives under a bridge was more valuable than his capacity to evaluate politically a determined situation.

In this sense, James Bond seems more like Sonsteby, although Ian Fleming, in some of his works is resolved not to give any political capacity to his personality. Author Fleming also worked in the intelligence service during the war. But the need to place Bond in a half ambiguous state -- his activity is not directed against the espionage of other nations but against a maffia called Phantom -- is the great weakness of Fleming's

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works. And from this weakness arise the incongruences to describe the secret agent in a faithful manner.

It is precisely for this reason that after so much fiction on espionage and secret agents, the publication of books on real personages evoke such a special interest. Although the intelligence and documental parts are the most substantial, at least in the case of Richard Sorge, the books do not maintain the narrative rhythm of novels. The authors of the book on Sorge investigated the life of the Soviet spy for three years in archives and by means of interviews. The excess of documentation in these books makes reading difficult, even though in the long run it prepares the reader for a better understanding of the impassioned subject of the "secret agents," who, paradoxically, are famous today.

Action also was not missing, above all in Sonsteby's case. In less than three years, the secret Norwegian secret agent, working for the British secret service and for the clandestine struggle in his own country, undertook exploits which make the activities of James Bond look like child's play. According to "Report from No. 24," Sonsteby, the saboteur agent who announced the danger by telephone -- killed only once in cold blood a German soldier "because he started to cry hysterically -- stole locomotives from prisoners ' trains, just as he changed his identity and operation. In fact, Sonsteby changed his identity 40 times and deprived himself of seeing his family during four years in order not to be identified by the Germans.

A summary of Sonsteby's exploits:

He destroyed three prisoner trains, permitting hundreds of Norwegians on their way to forced labor camps in Germany to flee to Sweden. To complete his mission against the recruitment of worker-slaves in the German factories, Sonsteby, Agent Number 24, had the files stolen from the forced labor office.

On a certain occasion, with a bicycle, a small valise full of explosives and a few tools he destroyed 44 Nazi planes, and 125 motors of the famous Messerschmidt.

Agent Number 24 dynamited the arms factory at Kongsberg at the beginning of 1944 and put it out of use until the end of the war. Sonsteby undertook this operation evading the vigilance of twenty guards with police dogs and after crossing a mined field.

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Sonsteby was trained in England, from where he organized a vast net of agents. Afterwards they were parachuted on Norway, and from then on he directed the operations, deceiving the Gestapo, which offered a remuneration equivalent to 50,000 dollars for the head of agent number 24. It is possible that his four years as secret agent have been more sacrifizing and without the delights of life possibly encountered by Richard Sorge. But Sonsteby, at least, lived to tell about it. And this is a rare privilege among the great spies of real life.

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Captions of photographs

Above: The fabulous Sonsteby,
hero of Norwegian resistance against the Germans
during the world war and whose exploits
inspired Ian Fleming to create James Bond.

Below: The Soviet spy Mark Zborowski
at the moment of his capture in Boston by the FBI.
He was one of the most efficient men of the fabulous Col. Abel.

On the right: Colonel Wennerstrom,
Swedish spy for the USSR, discovered in 1964.

Opposite page: Allen Dulles,
North American agent in Switzerland during the war and afterwards
first head of the Central Intelligence Agency.